

What Is the Role of Language Scholars in Solving Social Problems?

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We, Jino Escudero, Simoun Monzon, and Michaella Tindog of the class Linguistics 180: Language Problems of the Philippines, set forth the following roles and responsibilities that we believe should be adhered to by any scholar of languages and communication, especially with regard to investigating and resolving the language problems of English in the Philippines:

The first role of the language scholar is to diagnose the problem. The strength of any scholar lies in the precision and truthfulness of the analyses they formulate. It should therefore be the goal of all language scholars to generate better and more accurate descriptions of the linguistic situations and realities of their nation of study. After all, how can a language scholar begin to solve a language problem if the dimensions and unique characteristics of the problem have yet to be accurately assessed and identified? If we accept that a language scholar's job is to solve problems, the scholar must first, like a doctor before determining treatment, write up a diagnosis.

As an example of this role of the language scholar, the group submits the work of Isabel Pefianco-Martin and Ruanni Tupas. Both scholars develop more accurate diagnoses of the Philippine linguistic landscape by transforming or expanding upon the myopic and ossified conception of it held by previous scholars. Pefianco-Martin builds upon previous research to show our linguistic realities are much more complex: circles within circles (2014). Tupas meanwhile shatters the original boundaries of discussion to make room for further research by confronting the material conditions which give rise to the elitist tendencies behind the research of Philippine English (2004). Both scholars give us a better lay of the linguistic land, a better diagnosis of our social cancers. Given this knowledge, the language scholar is better enabled to undertake their second role.

The second role of the language scholar is to, to the degree allowed by their position, power, and influence as a scholar, attempt to solve problems they have diagnosed. After a scholar identifies and addresses these social problems of language, the next step they must take is to take it to the people and convey these issues to the masses. A scholar cannot solve a social problem alone, and so, attempting to solve the problem would be easier if we let the people be engaged in their reality. A problem of society is not the burden of one but of the many. After all, an individual should not bear the work of liberation alone; addressing these problems should be a collective movement. This is what underlies the role of a language scholar—emphasizing his perceived social

problems and solving them. From here, he must go out and engage with the larger population, seek out the masses and start descending the so-called “ivory tower” of the academy.

Prior to this, it should be one of the scholar’s responsibilities to convey and introduce to the masses the social problems that they have identified, such as problems associated with the status of English in the Philippines as stated in the previous paragraphs. In other words, a “work of enlightenment.” However, there remains a problem that we should be avoiding as scholars and that is to speak with a privileged tongue, look “arrogant,” and sound “condescending.” In this regard, a language scholar should not think of itself as a “savior” but rather also just a part of the community who shares the experience of bearing on the pressure of these social problems. So instead of, perhaps, using the experiences of the larger population, may the scholars of those in the community be a bridge to the academia, and at the same time, mobilize—take the initiative and the rightful measures so that the issue of academia should not continue to dwell exclusively in the academia.

In addition to our continued pursuit in finding answers, seeking solutions, and addressing the social problems we have identified as scholars of the academe, linguists’ persistence in the study of structure remains a relevant issue. As Tupas (2004) stated in his article, in the work of liberation and solving social problems, perhaps it would be better if the issue on the study of structure and going beyond its limits should go hand in hand to move towards the grasp and analysis of language in context of the material condition of Philippine society. In other words, we must also study the implications of language in society in terms of its politics. Simply stating, the focus on the politics of language. in a way, shifts the focus to the people and their centrality within the linguistic discourse as stated by Santiago (2021) because they take part in history making and are constituents in addressing and solving the issues of the society. And so, when descriptive study and of exceeding beyond the boundaries (Baumgarten, 2015; Tupas, 2004) are hand in hand in the study of linguistics, linguists and the community can work together in solving the issues that come with it. This is one of the possible contributions and roles that a linguist, or any other scholar can do, to bridge the academia and the community in a way that is not arrogant nor patronizing—that might be done through fellowship or in the sense of *pakikipagkapwa*.

The third role of the scholar is, finally, to recognize that at a certain point, mere scholarship is no longer enough to address the problems initially diagnosed. If the language scholar is truly dedicated to the cause of solving a language problem, then they may eventually reach the following conclusion: that their station as a scholar is limited and that theory must eventually turn into praxis. The scholar must cease primarily being a scholar and must become an individual of action. It is no longer enough to be a consultant to a body of legislators—one must become a legislator themselves. The scholar must access the levers of power and change. We see this in former scholars such as Professor Walden Bello (who has served a term in the Philippine Congress) and ex-academic and author Robert Francis Garcia (who works with NGOs and the Commission on Human Rights). Though Bello and Garcia are not linguists, they have come to a certain realization: that the change they want to create in the world can-

not fully be accomplished inside the ivory tower. As scholars of language, both aspiring and tenured, both beginning undergraduate and veteran postdoctoral fellow, there may come a point where we realize we must hang up our caps and togas, put down our pens and processors of words, and take up instead the call for public office and social outreach.

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